Book Section:

Centre or Periphery? The Architecture of the Travelling Street Fair

abstract

This essay introduces the annual November Street Fair in Loughborough, and discusses the challenges that are encountered when trying to discuss experience at the fair or in the town during this event. It is argued that the terminology of 'centre' and 'periphery' fails to account for this hybrid situation.

biography

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Centre or Periphery? The Architecture of the Travelling Street Fair

This essay will explore a number of difficulties that are encountered when trying to discuss the architectural environment of the travelling street fair. Frequent dismissals of the fair by polite society, academia and the architectural profession (as frivolous, ephemeral or insubstantial) have recourse to a vocabulary that describes the fair as a peripheral event involving behaviour at the peripheries of social acceptability, with peripheral social or architectural impact upon the host town. The essay will approach these issues obliquely using a single example, the November Street Fair that takes place in Loughborough, a market town in the centre of England.

Although the November fair has become one of the most significant events in the calendar as it marked the end of the annual travelling season, the historical relationship between the development of the market, the fair and the urban and social fabric of the town is in many ways typical for settlements throughout England and beyond, such that the specific points raised here can find more general applicability. The diagram of Loughborough in figure 1 shows the 'classic' organisation of the town around the crossroads, and indicates how the settlement itself emerged within a network of towns, with the four roads (Derby Road; Nottingham Road; Leicester Road; and Ashby Road) leading to the four principal

neighbours, all roughly fifteen miles, or a day's walk away. It also shows the 'classic' position of the Market Place at that same location, and the 'classic' concentric growth patterns of an English market town, with a more or less clearly demarcated periphery between town and countryside.

Just as this map shows the town as a clearly bounded totality, so it is possible to locate an easily perceptible edge or boundary of the fair in any of the several road closures that emerge around town during the event. This kind of clear definition is deceptive, yet helps maintain the kinds of binary thinking that keep town and fair as discrete, separate entities. This applies not only to physical boundaries, but to conceptions of behaviour as well. Describing the opening of the fair in 1955, the *World's Fair* reporter noted that: 'On the stroke of twelve the Mayor declared the fair open and for three hectic days Loughborough lost its customary dignified character as the centre of the famous Quorn Hunt and gave itself up to the spirit of carnival.' Examples that reinforce this distinction between dignity and carnival are easy to find when the Fair comes to town, from the chips and candyfloss stalls, to the loud and competing music, to the wasteful, non-productive rides themselves, all of which are installed within the polite architectural surroundings of this market town and help to maintain a prosaic binary categorisation that positions the Fair as transgressive, profligate and unhealthy, in contrast to the Town which is good, healthy and so on.[i]

However, both these categories have contributed to the development of the character and physical shape of the town and can be traced back through Loughborough's history to its original charter, issued in 1221 by Henry III for a weekly market and an annual fair on the 'vigil and in the day of St. Peter ad Vincula [1st August]'. A subsequent proclamation dated the '28th day of April 1228' stated 'and further that [Hugh le Despencer and his heirs] may hold a Fair each year to the extent of three days that is to say on the eve day and morrow of the Feast of All Souls [2nd November].' (Green and Green 1964: Appendix 2) Traditionally held on the Market Square, the annual November fair now begins on the second Thursday of November and has expanded to cover most of the town. According to Council figures, there are now about twenty large rides and numerous 'juveniles' (children's rides), games, novelty stalls, and refreshment stands. These appear seemingly out of nowhere, and vanish in the small hours of Sunday morning, returning the town centre so quickly to 'normal' in time for sombre Remembrance Sunday celebrations that one's memory of the fair's occurrence can be called into question.

Despite this long, combined lineage, Loughborough (like many others) defines itself as a Market-town rather than a Fair-Town, with all the overtones of good business and accumulation that this implies, and in contrast to which the fair is positioned as a bad relation. However, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White argue that this simple binary approach cannot account for the heart of the town: 'At the market [and fairground in the] centre of the polis we discover a commingling of categories usually kept separate and opposed: centre and periphery, inside and outside, stranger and local, commerce and festivity, high and low. [Here] pure and simple categories of thought find themselves perplexed and one-sided. Only hybrid notions are appropriate to such a hybrid place.' (Stallybrass and White 1986: 27)

Although their referent here is the market place and the market rather than the fair, their broader discussion in the chapter from which this quote is taken (rather enigmatically entitled 'The Fair, the Pig, Authorship') explores the challenges to 'normal' social identity that are posed by both the weekly market and the annual fair. While mindful of the detail of these differences, they lie beyond the scope of this chapter, which instead will follow the 'comminglings' between such events and their 'host' places, and examine some of the gaps, contacts and overlaps between these two entities.

The Market Place shown in figure 2 may well provide a focus for both the fair and the town, but it must be taken as a spatial and temporal location whose constituent elements belong to several networks operating at various scales. The layered temporalities of the Street Fair and Town interact in complex ways along a historical progression that can be followed back over nearly eight centuries, calling into question more general assumptions of the townscape's static and permanent nature and its primacy vis-à-vis the fair's ephemerality. The presence of the fair is inscribed in this central urban space, as a void and an activity that along with the market pre-dates the town and determined its form. Nevertheless, while the Market Place might remain the conceptual centre of Loughborough, the central public square of a centralised settlement that holds some distant memory of the fair when empty, the fair itself has increasingly spread throughout the town centre. Large-scale rides such as roller-coasters are now erected on the Granby Street Car Park, several blocks away from the Market Place at the edge of Queens Park, so that now the fair's centre of gravity is no longer easily coterminous with the Market Place.

In addition to the challenge that the memory of the fair presents to the town's developed identity, the sheer scale of rides such as the *WaveSwinger* or the *Jumbo Circus Fun House*, shown in figure 2 to be taller than the three average storey facades lining the Market Square and main town centre streets, also upsets assumptions that the town is larger than the fair, that permanent, civic architecture must be bigger than portable, temporary rides.

Alongside the challenges that such forced reconsiderations of the town's identity present, the visitor or citizen's experience of the fair-town can begin to be discussed. There are various physical and temporal scales at which to go at this. In addition to what we might term the temporal-historical passage of centuries legible in the empty space of the Market Square, the temporal-experiential dimensions of this identity are perhaps more readily comprehensible, though these too enjoy a variety of semi-autonomous phasings that would include the annual cycle of three-day take-over of the town by the fair, a weekday-weekend cycle, the diurnal cycle, an individual's visit to the fair, or a single ride or event. Similarly nested, the physical scales inflecting identity involve the individual body of the fair-goer, the individual ride, the town centre of Loughborough, the network of the 'Heart of England' and Back End Run fairs, the UK and Europe.

Indeed, such spatial and temporal non-coincidence is not limited to the fair-town, but also opens up in a number of formal and informal events: for example, figure 3 shows William Percival's *Waltzer*, "With the Best Sounds" and its decorative Disco theme, which emerges as an alternative club space as much as it is part of the fair. As the evening wears on the ride closes in on itself, closes itself off from its surroundings while attracting a predominantly under-18 audience with the promise (and delivery) of pseudo-transgressive hardcore techno music and a rave environment that they would not otherwise (well, legally, or with parental consent) be able to access.

As much as the *Waltzers* changes its identity as dusk settles, becoming partly peripheral to the fairground crowd, it also provides an example of the complex range of interactions between different individuals and groups of people that can take place within a single ride and throughout the fair. Here, at a basic level, a distinction can be made between the main ride operator (and DJ); temporary operators who ride the ride/dancefloor, circulating around and spinning the booths while remaining apparently unperturbed by the rough motion of the ride; small groups of punters in

the spinning booths, and lines of spectators described by Paul Needham: 'Crowds sat around the back of the *waltzer* listening to the latest tunes with light shows better than any night club—free to all no entrance fees here! The screams of the girls—"if you wanna go faster you gotta scream, let's hear you scream come on"!' (Needham 1999–2000: vol II: 23-24). Even within this one ride, each of these constituencies remain in close physical proximity but barely acknowledge each other, each behaving according to distinct codes and rituals, acting and moving in very different ways.

This is but one example of the opportunities for multiple and varied uses, or mis-uses, that are taken up within the fair environment. Once again refuting binary notions that homogenise the behaviour that takes place within or without the fair, there are many groups that visit the fair at different times and conform or mis-use it in different ways. This observation can extend to citizens using the town in an 'ordinary' way while the fair is physically present but at a low ebb during in the day, while shops and offices are open and the everyday activities of the town carry on 'normally'.

The experience of this latter user in particular draws attention to a clear tension between the two competing entities under discussion here. The periphery of the Street-Fair is markedly different to that of the town, their boundaries do not coincide, and the manifestation of this is most noticeable across the strange one-way periphery that occurs at the back of rides adjacent to the main High Street facades of the town illustrated in figure 4. The various examples of this gap (the physical gap that provides an access way between the backs of stalls or rides and the shops of the town) present a making-strange of familiar architecture. The principal street elevations, businesses and general paraphernalia of the town centre are made invisible (a variety of techniques are used here, from full coverage where rides or stalls exceed the adjacent buildings in height, to distraction or appropriation, where the street facades are incorporated into the architecture of the fair, or where rides are erected over or around street furniture, road bollards and streetlamps).

The particular dynamics of this gap, and the increasing or decreasing peripheral role it plays, changes by day and by night, as the dominance of the fair waxes and wanes, or the resistance offered by the everyday exchanges situated in the town decreases as night falls. During the day in particular, the duality of the town-fair situation is felt acutely along these boundaries. Most shops remain open, accessible via this temporary corridor-like route around the town. Everyday life can carry on, but not as normal; navigation around town and between familiar shops is made awkward

and unfamiliar, normal orientation is disrupted by the overwhelming presence of the rides, and the normal hierarchy of properties is reversed as the best commercial and retail addresses in town, whose civic architecture normally enjoys a commanding presence across the Market Square and principal streets of the town, are temporarily transported to tiny alleyway situations.

Conversely, what for most of the year really are tiny alleyways running perpendicular to the Market Square and main streets of the town become significant infrastructural routes during the November fair, allowing access and emergency pedestrian escape while the main thoroughfares of the town are closed off. The small, temporary signage that is taped up during the fair to draw attention to these emergency exits is the only indication of broader bureaucratic liaison between the authorities of fair and town brought together through their coordinated planning.

Examining a figure-ground plan of the November fair, such as that included in figure 1, its portrayal of the fairground's infrastructure is markedly different from the spatial and temporal experiences of the fair as event. The figure-ground makes the fair appear overly linear, missing changes in scale between tight fit and small stalls and the disorientation that this engenders, compared with the large scale rides on Granby Street Car Park and the Showmen's Living Vans area on the edge of Queens Park.[ii] Neither does the figure-ground help account for the difficulties in navigation through the gap, missing the reversals noted above, and failing to suggest the canyon-like sensation induced by rides that register only a small footprint while extending three storeys of blank rear façade.

Even if they were only in town to go shopping or to visit the bank, most citizens would move back and forth between the space of the fair and this gap, only using the corridor for short distances to reach the threshold of particular properties. It is entirely possible, though, to circumnavigate the fair while remaining in the town centre: we could imagine some dissenter who did not welcome the fair's presence following its periphery around this gap and avoiding its interior, boycotting its attractions if not its environment completely. Similarly, the reluctance of many business owners to accept the position of rides immediately outside their properties can be understood. Recounting such an event at the Stratford Mop Fair, George Kemp (owner of a *test-your-strength* attraction) described how 'This guy came of out McDonald's and he said—'cos I had my lorry there— and he said "Whose vehicle is this?" … I said "It's mine." He said, "Who gave permission for you to put it there?" I said "King John." He

said, "Who?" I said, "You know, Richard the Lionheart's brother."' (Birkett 1996:19) This kind of incredulity registered by the *guy from McDonald's* reinforces the more general making strange of familiar surroundings, but also provides a reminder of the temporal-historical dimensions of the town's relationship to the fair. When it arrives each year, it may well feel like a cuckold's egg has been laid in a familiar nest, but as George Kemp points out, the presence and claims of the fair pre-date any of the current buildings and business of the town by many centuries.

inversion

Recognition of this legacy and complexity is important, but its relevance must not be restricted to an understanding of the fair. The kinds of awkward encounters just described around the strange gap can be easily dismissed or simply forgotten when the fair packs up and leaves town, but as Barbara Babcock has pointed out, we do this at our peril. 'What is socially peripheral is often symbolically central, and if we ignore or minimize inversion and other forms of cultural negation, we often fail to understand the dynamics of symbolic processes generally.' (Babcock 1978: 32) Adopting Babcock's notion of inversion, this can be used to collect the various encounters associated with the gap. The price to be paid for ignoring these moments of inversion is the atrophy of our understanding of various individual and group identities that pass through or over, and are thus challenged by, this gap.

Stallybrass and White acknowledge the importance of Babcock's work in their ruminations on *hybrid concepts*, and reiterate how the symbolic importance of events such as the carnival far outstrips its actual social importance. While this repeats at a very general level some of the observations made already, they continue immediately with an assertion that bears directly on the present consideration of the gap. The exercise of power, they state, 'locates its most powerful symbolic repertoires at borders, margins and edges, rather than at the accepted centres, of the social body.' (Stallybrass and White 1986: 20)[iii] The symbolic and architectural issues that are encountered in and across the gap present a far wider range of possible 'bodies' than are usually encountered at the accepted centre of town, and if we are to follow Babcock's invitation to consider inversion, then this process has access to a far wider range of ingredients when the fair is co-present with the town than otherwise.

The accepted referent of the 'social body' drawn upon by Architecture, urbanism and many other institutions through which power is exercised and maintained is, of course, the static, whole, beautiful 'classical' human body. Inversion of this classical body by the fair has frequently been both licensed and limited to a temporary acceptance of excessive behaviour such as drunkenness or overt sexuality, where the more base capacities and bits of the classical body are a put on show or allowed out. But this is precisely the kind of minimized inversion that Babcock warns against. Instead of a licensed inversion of prevailing norms, a more thoroughgoing encounter should be accepted, one that counters the policing role given to the classical body by introducing what we might term the 'grotesque body,' not simply an ugly or bawdy version of the classical, but mobile, split, multiple and different in kind.[iv] Only thus can a model of the body—whether social, architectural or individual—inform hybrid notions with the capacity to account for the fair, but also with the imperative to challenge the 'most powerful symbolic repertoires' of power at frequently inaccessible edges. During the street fair, these two states co-exist, most easily conceptualised as the good form of the town (the whole body) and the grotesque body of the fair, although this situation cannot be sustained as the framework for a binary understanding of the situation, as the simple examination of the gap, or the *Waltzers*, has shown.

These examples upset the kinds of easy distinctions supported by model of the classical body and the tangible boundaries that are associated with it. Control across the boundary of the street fair is established, maintained, and exercised in a wider and more sophisticated range of ways than this model suggests. Indeed, the Fair itself is a highly coded environment when in full swing, no different to many other powerful established institutions wishing to retain control over the populace.

The 1955 *World's Fair* article already mentioned stated: 'The powers that be are to be congratulated on providing a really outstanding fair this year. The rides were far more varied while the introduction of fresh machines definitely attracted a lot of interest.' That publication's write-up for the more recent event illustrated here (which took place between 10th and 13th November 2010) adopts a not dissimilar tone to the 1955 reporter, and includes similar formulaic content. This in itself is important, as it draws attention to a very traditional and conservative streak that runs through the Showmen's Guild and the travelling fair community more generally. The write-up

begins with an account of the opening ceremony, noting particularly who was there in an official capacity:

> The official party arrived and assembled on the front of William Percival's *Waltzer* several minutes before 6pm on Wednesday November 10th. Following a fanfare of trumpets from students of Loughborough Endowed School, the leader of Charnwood Council, Mike Preston commented on the excellent fair which he said was a result of the co-operation between the showpeople and the council. Replying on behalf of the Showmen's Guild of Great Britain, Senior Vice-President David Wallis spoke of the excellent fair safety record pointing out that this year had been the safest on record. David also welcomed the new Markets Superintendent Mike Bird, who he said had done an excellent job. The Mayor, Councillor Jill Vincent, welcomed the showpeople and commented that the fair provided good entertainment for the whole family. She then read the Charter granted by King Henry III and the fun began. (Springthorpe 2010: 5)

This long list of protagonists is worth citing at length because it begins to indicate how many different parties have an interest in the organisation of the event, and how the 'co-operation' between them was perceived to produce such an 'excellent fair'. Behind the scenes, there is a great deal of control exerted over the fair from a variety of different sources, including Local and Central Government, the Showmen's Guild, Police, Fire, and to some extent local residents groups. The layout and positioning of the shows within the existing town fabric, as well as their erection and pull-down, the location of the showmen's caravans and mobile homes, access for waste disposal, emergency services, coordination and so on, is all carefully organised and policed as a collaboration between the Markets Department and Showmen's Guild. At the centre of this nexus frequently lies the Market Superintendent, who wields significant influence over the interpretation and implementation of these various forces.

As much as the planning of the fair is itself a hybrid process recording the input, agreements and compromises of various different parties, all involved return to and rally behind the classical body and various other simple binaries mentioned to obfuscate this exercise of power.[v] The provision of a simple, bounded entity diverts attention away from more thoroughgoing understanding, more nuanced analysis that operates more flexibly across a wider range of roles than an approach that accepts the terminology of the periphery. Such approaches allow the fair—the peripheral—to be easily dismissed, because it is positioned with respect to an accepted 'centre'. The uneven binary of such arguments also relies on an analysis that occurs at a single and fixed scale. However, the straightforward observations offered here warn

against readings that position the fair as the simple 'other' of the town. Accepting the range of broader and differing contexts in which both operate, neither can be taken as a 'whole' or a 'totality'. Consider again the multiple actors physically co-present on the *Waltzers* who could also be addressed individually or as small groups, all of which are separate entities with separate networks of association: consider the whole ride, gradually distancing its relations with the fair and enjoying an autonomy that situates it as a club- or rave-space rather than a ride as night wears on: or consider the assemblages of unfamiliar parts that constitute the temporary gap or corridor between fair and town where component parts are legible as belonging to different totalities (the fair, the town) and simultaneously involved in and productive of the awkward experience articulated by the *guy from McDonald's*.

While this essay has suggested that such examples challenge conventional readings of the fair, the consequences can unsettle the easy reliance on peripheral–central binaries present in many other arguments. The important issue in the broader context of *Peripheries* is that this move provides an alternate approach to addressing the fair's architectural environment, one that is not reliant upon an overall good form of architectural space or objects, and that helps account for dimensions of both entities and their interaction that conventional accounts of architecture, with their propensity to focus on the physical object, would miss. With this approach, there is no longer an easy periphery or boundary that defines the edge, no boundary from which some thing establishes its identity or starts its presencing, as Heidegger described Greek notion of *peras* (πέρας). (Heidegger 1971: 154)

While the event of the fair might precipitate a re-examination or inversion of social and symbolic processes, the challenge is to retain the more enduring consequences of this inversion when the fair has moved on. Disrupting the binary understanding associated with the boundaries illustrated here, what was taken too simply as the periphery must now more carefully be approached as both the gap and overlap between two entities that occurs as the fair is installed temporarily into the centre of the urban fabric of the town. This hybrid gap–overlap emerges as a more successful way in to what began as an analysis of the interaction between these two entities that accepted the terminology of the periphery. The hybrid is able to operate more flexibly across a wider range of roles, and anchors these into broader networks of relationships; it helps account for dimensions of both entities, and their interaction, that conventional accounts of architecture and urbanism overlook. It approaches the

peripheral as a condition rather than as a physical position or location. Indeed, the town and the fair can be taken to have several peripheries, depending on what scale is adopted as primary for any particular analysis. The final word goes to Stallybrass and White, who note the fluidity, and the persistent uncertainty, that must be accepted as stable relationships between centre and periphery are relinquished: 'Thus in the marketplace 'inside' and 'outside' (and hence identity itself) are persistently mystified. It is a place where limit, centre and boundary are confirmed yet also put in jeopardy.' (Stallybrass and White 1978: 28)

1: the location of Loughborough in the Heart of England; the basic urban configuration of the town based on a late nineteenth century Ordinance Survey map, indicating how the settlement emerged within a network of other local towns connected by the four roads meeting at the Market Place; and a figure-ground drawing of the town-fair centre

2: Loughborough Market Place, in 'normal' and 'fair' situations

3: the Waltzer

4: several instances of the gap between fairground rides or stalls and the civic architecture of the town centre

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i   To this general situation, the fact that Loughborough has become synonymous with sporting prowess and fitness thanks to the specialisms of its University heightens this tension.

ii   A similar criticism could be made of a plan of Loughborough in its everyday configuration—every architectural plan tends towards the homogenisation of space, as Levebvre reminds us—though the logic of the figure-ground presentation offers a closer connection to this everyday mode.

iii   Here, they cite the same passage from *The Reversible World*, and applaud the 'scrupulous accuracy of [Babcock's] formulation'.

iv   Stallybrass and White make a similar connection, with related qualifications: 'Thinking the marketplace is […] somewhat like thinking the body: adequate conception founders upon the problematic familiarity, the enfolding of intimacy, or its domain. The tangibility of its boundaries implies a local closure and stability, even a unique sense of belonging, which obscure its structural dependence upon a 'beyond' through which this 'familiar' and 'local' feeling is itself produced.' (Stallybrass and White 1978: 28)

v   The broader issue of cooperation is frequently raised in the Parliamentary report on *Travelling Fairs*; for example: 'It is clear that rowdyism can be a problem. However, the memorandum we received from Irvin Leisure, which was later expanded on in oral evidence, showed how at Mile End in East London, with skilful management between the organisers, police, local authority, and local residents groups, even very difficult problems were overcome. [Ev vol II pp.31-34; QQ225, 226] Obviously this was a tribute to local people and the organisers, but it demonstrates what is possible given the necessary cooperation between the relevant parties. Similarly, cooperation between the Council, emergency services, local residents and

showpeople at Kirkcaldy had ensured the smooth running of one of the largest funfairs in the UK. [Annex]' (Environmental, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee 1999–2000: Section 15)